

Asia-Pacific Security Studies



Trouble in Thailand's Muslim South: Separatism, not Global Terrorism

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Key Findings

Since the beginning of 2004, southern Thailand has become caught up in an escalating cycle of violence. In January 2004, Thailand placed three provinces in the South - Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat (known collectively as "Patani") under martial law following a well coordinated attack on army and police facilities. Subsequent violence, including the suffocation of around 80 Muslim youth detained in army trucks in October, 2004 has polarized views about the ongoing conflict.

In Thailand there are around four million Muslims within a total population of 62 million - 80% of whom live in five southern provinces (Songkhla and Satun are the other two). Despite violence in the south of Thailand hitting the headlines in 2004, there has been ongoing dissatisfaction with the Thai government, in terms of lack of development, cultural identity and human rights abuses. Intra-elite rivalry and criminality complicate the picture and contribute to the violence.

The emergence of separatist-linked violence in Thailand's south is the result of complex social upheaval. Judging the violence to be the result of al-Qaida, or its regional affiliate *Jemaah Islamiyah* (JI), is premature. The principal umbrella grouping of separatist groups, *Bersatu*, directs its anger primarily at the Thai government on the grounds of perceptions of local injustice.

Nonetheless, Thailand is now addressing the problem in its Muslim south because it fears that international terrorist actors may be able to graft themselves onto the situation in southern Thailand. The Thaksin government is aware that the means to stem rebellion in the south depends as much on socio-economic policies as it does on the actions of the security forces. The Thai government has pushed forward a raft of new measures that include development funds and the closer monitoring of Islamic schools in addition to an increase in action by the security forces.

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Introduction

In January 2004, the Thaksin government placed three provinces in southern Thailand - Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat - under martial law following a well-coordinated attack on army and police facilities and a number of state-run schools. Then in April 2004, armed groups launched a series of coordinated attacks on security checkpoints which resulted in the army killing more than 100 of the attackers, including some who took sanctuary in the Kreu-Se mosque. On October 25, 2004, Thai troops killed nine protesters at Tak Bai, tensions rose in the region when another 80 suffocated after being piled into army trucks.

The Thai government, under Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, had for several years denied that separatist activity was brewing in southern Thailand, despite slowly rising levels of violence, but now has been forced to concede publicly that this is the case. Following the April 2004 violence, Thaksin explained to the Thai public that the "bandits" were both Muslim and Buddhist and that the cause of the fighting was the local political infighting and organized crime. Thai officials have taken great care not to label the violence as "Islamic" in an effort to preserve community relations. In any event, Bangkok is paying greater attention to the Muslim south through a series of social and economic initiatives designed to undercut the conditions that have fostered discontent. Thailand is home to four million Muslims-a relatively small population amidst some 60 million Thais-the vast majority of whom are Malay speakers living in the southern provinces.

Clearly *Jemaah Islamiyah* (JI) - an affiliate of *al Qaida* - has had a presence in Thailand, including in the Muslim south. In a post-September 11 world, it might be tempting to view the emergence of separatist activity in Southern Thailand as part and parcel of a transnational terrorist threat from *al Qaida* and/or the supposed rise of Islamic fundamentalism amongst Thai Muslims. Although there is a real danger that international terrorist groups will exploit the situation in southern Thailand, separatism in the southern provinces rests on different goals. For Malay speaking peoples in southern Thailand, there is a strong perception that their ethno-religious identity is under siege. Poor administration and a host of social problems have exacerbated discontent. Intra-elite feuding and common criminality have also played a role in social unrest in the south. These background factors suggest that the key to stability in Thailand's southern provinces lies in addressing factors that contribute to social tension.

Background Factors

Bangkok's difficult, and often testy, relationship with the predominantly Muslim communities of the south has old origins. Resistance to, and resentment of, the Thai state began with the incorporation of these provinces into the Kingdom of Thailand in the early twentieth century, when the border was demarcated in agreement with British Malaya. The colonial-era drawing of boundaries saw substantial Malay communities in the provinces of Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat, Songkhla, and Satun come under Thai rule. It is in the provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat that Malay speakers continue to form the majority.

Despite widespread post-WWII sympathy amongst the Malayan public for ethnic Malays "trapped" in the Kingdom of Thailand, and Malaya's (and Britain's) war against communist insurgents created an impetus to forge a deal with the Kingdom of Thailand. A *quid pro quo* understanding emerged whereby Thailand would deny sanctuary to communist guerrillas and Malaya (Malaysia after 1963) would not support the irredentist cause of elements of the Patani elite to "reunite" with Malay(si)a. Respect for each other's territorial integrity became a part of ASEAN, first as an informal understanding, and later codified at the 1976 Bali Summit when members signed the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC). This rules out any possibility that Malaysia will support Patani secessionists - Malaysia's reassurance in this regard is absolutely critical from Bangkok's standpoint. However, Malaysian leaders,

including Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi, have registered their concerns and criticisms of Thai handling of the south after the deaths of so many

Muslim youth while in custody in October 2004. These expressions do not, however, question Thai sovereignty over Patani.

As part of Thailand's modernization project, the Kingdom endeavored to forge a uniform national identity. In the 1930s and 1940s, Thailand attempted the assimilation of the Chinese migrant communities as well as indigenous ethnic minorities. The Malay speaking populations of the south have largely resisted Thai attempts to transform its Malay minorities into Thai-speaking Muslims. Patani-based resistance to the state of Thailand has been grounded in various discontents. Alongside the problems of underdevelopment and maladministration rests this long-standing issue of identity. Separatist minded populations in Southern Thailand have an identity grounded in lineage from the Malay Kingdom of Patani, the Malay language, and the Islamic faith. A fused Malay/Islamic identity is inseparable in this case, and government institutions, including state schools, are a threat to both. Not only have schools - the primary vehicle for Thai language instruction - been singled out for vandalism by separatist elements, but levels of education in the south are the lowest in all of Thailand.

Perceptions of injustice further cloud the issue. Human rights activists, Thai and international, complain of breaches of the law by officials. For example, a demonstration in Hat Yai in December 2002 against the construction of a gas pipeline to Malaysia resulted in injuries to a number of the petitioners. Amnesty International claimed that police had charged peaceful protesters. A more recent incident has generated anger too. On March 12, 2004, Somchai Neelapajit, a Muslim human rights lawyer, who was defending alleged JI members and suspects from the January violence, simply went missing. Amnesty International's report on the disappearance pointed to the possibility of the involvement of security forces, further adding: "In the last three years human rights defenders in Thailand have faced increasing threats, intimidation, and harassment, particularly if they are members of minority groups." There is ample evidence that human rights abuses, when they occur in the south, are perceived by Thai Muslims as being "anti-Muslim" in nature. There is also evidence that suspects arrested during 2004 have been subject to torture, although the Thai Ministry of the Interior, in admitting to past abuses, claims that it no longer engages in this practice.

As expressions of discontent, various separatist/irredentist groups with different agendas have emerged over the years. The *Barisan Revolusi Nasionale* (BRN - National Revolutionary Front) married its separatist demands with a socialist ideology, and cooperated with the Malayan Communist Party on the other side of the border during the 1950s. The Patani United Liberation Organisation (PULO) later emerged as a separatist movement to restore Patani as a separate sovereign entity, seemingly dropping any desire to join Malaysia, a country that has failed to offer them succor. Deputy President of PULO in exile, Haji Lukman Bin Lima, talks of a "Jihad" against the "Thai Buddhist Kafir government", aimed at ending "domination over our Malay Islamic land ... Patani". Lukman's statements reveal a fusion of Malay and Islamic identity. (There is also a splinter PULO grouping calling itself "New PULO".) Another group espouses a stronger Islamic identity - *Gerakan Mujahideen Islam Pattani* (GMIP). Although all advocate independence from Thailand, their political motivations and philosophy differ. In the last several years, these groups have forged an umbrella grouping known by the Malay name *Bersatu* (Unity).

Beginning in the 1960s the King of Thailand showed a special interest in the Muslim south, even establishing a residency there (as he did in other troubled areas of Thailand). Thailand attempted to co-opt the traditional elite in southern Thailand, but in time replaced it with government appointed provincial councils. Thai Muslims have achieved good levels of representation in parliament, mainly through the Democrat Party that dominates in the southern provinces. The cabinet minister, Wan Muhamad Nor Matha, has played a special role within the Thaksin administration in tackling Muslim issues and concerns. The Thai government continues to rely on the advice of the National Council for Muslims, which consists of five eminent persons, who advise the ministries of education and the interior.

When insurgency emerged in Southern Thailand in the 1960s, the Thai government responded with a military and socio-economic program. Thailand's counter-insur-

gency doctrine rested on winning support from the populations in outlying areas. But the major concern of the times was the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT), which was strongest in the north and northeast provinces. The Muslim/Malay separatists were viewed as a minor irritation without major international backers. They did not pose the same kind of threat to stability that the CPT did. But this calculation has changed - the specter of separatism in the south is clearly Bangkok's most pressing problem in terms of national cohesion.

The government of Thailand has, for many years, downplayed violence in southern Thailand. Thaksin has blamed "bandits" and "drug runners" for the deaths of more than 50 policemen in the greater Patani region in the last three years. Senior Thai officials have publicly stressed the declining numbers of separatists in southern Thailand - some estimates give the numbers at a mere 20 still active hardliners. But official denial has not meant inaction. The Thai security forces, in conjunction with Malaysian counterparts, have worked hard in recent years to arrest a number of separatist leaders on both sides of the border. Police action was not the only initiative. In July 2002, Thaksin charged his cousin, army General Chaisit Shinawatra, with negotiating a peace settlement with separatist elements from both PULO and BRN. All of these events might suggest that separatist activity was greater than Thaksin admitted, and his actions appear to confirm exactly that. With prominent leaders of *Bersatu* arrested or killed in the past several years, Thailand has worked assiduously to round up remaining rebel leaders. However, some complacency appears to have worked itself into the Thaksin government, perhaps believing it had a tighter grip on the problem than it in fact did. In March 2002 Thaksin abolished both the Combined 43rd Civilian-Police-Military Command and the Southern Border Provinces Administration Center, which were military-led institutions to coordinate monitoring of the south.

Separatism Re-Emerges

In January 2004 a well coordinated attack marked the beginning of what might be a renewal of old hostilities in southern Thailand. Thirty men attacked an army depot in Narathiwat, stealing a large quantity of weapons and killing four soldiers. The attack revealed tactics beyond that of mere bandits - the attackers spread spikes on the road and further blocked their pursuers with trees and booby traps. Eighteen schools were also set alight and two empty police posts were vandalized. No particular group claimed responsibility, but the highly coordinated nature of the attacks suggested that separatist elements were back in business, with strong suspicion falling on *Bersatu* groups. In recent times, this type of coordinated action against official targets has never been so well executed. In subsequent days, three policemen were killed in a blast and marked assailants beat several monks to death in premeditated attacks. Such rare sectarian violence shocked the Thai public. PULO's Lukman boasted that security personnel in Thailand were "falling like leaves."

Thaksin initially denied that these were attacks by separatists. Police sources went a little further in describing the attackers as "separatists turned bandits." Thaksin also blamed army incompetence, showing little sympathy for the four deceased servicemen: "If you have a whole battalion there and you're negligent, then you deserve to die" (*Nation*, January 5, 2004). Privately Thaksin and his cabinet drew different conclusions about the nature of the attacks. Malaysian Foreign Minister, Syed Hamid Albar, after talks with his Thai counterpart, Surakiart Sathirathai, revealed that Thailand considered these attacks to be the work of "terrorists and not bandits." The Thai Defense Minister, Thamarak Isaragura, gave the media a statement soon after the January violence that strongly indicated that this was more than just the work of common criminals: "We think the group [of attackers] is trying to draw attention from international terrorist groups for possible support." The actions of the Thai government also confirmed that these troubles were politically motivated - something Thailand now concedes. Not only did Thaksin declare martial law in Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat, but he dispatched 3,000 troops under the command of Lieutenant General Phongsak Aekbansingha (commander of the Fourth

Army) to enforce it. This is not the type of response that Thailand usually mounts to deal with bandits or organized criminals.

A Case of International Terrorism?

The 2004 separatist violence in Thailand's southern provinces has set off alarm bells that it did not earlier. Patani's separatists are responding to local concerns, but are equally linked to the global Islamic community. The concerns of Muslims everywhere over issues like Palestine, or America's policies toward Iraq, have some resonance within Patani. In the past separatist groups have been able to gain sympathy and funding from elsewhere in the Islamic world. Separatist leaders have gained training experience in Libya and Afghanistan. Hardline groups in Indonesia and Malaysia have offered moral support to the Patani independence cause. In former times, Patani's separatist forces have forged links (albeit pretty weak in some cases) with other separatist groups from the wider region, including the Tamil Tigers (LTTE), the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) and Abu Sayyaf. This diversity of groups indicates that such links are largely about material gains (including survival, sanctuary, and smuggling) rather than a common cause. But these types of international links may not be the biggest cause for concern.

The emergence of *Gerakan Mujahideen Islam Pattani*, the newest of the separatist groups under the leadership of Wae Ka Raeh, reputedly a veteran of Afghanistan's war with the USSR, may represent a new phenomenon within southern Thailand. This, of course, raises the serious issue of possible links to Osama bin Laden or others within *al Qaida*. There is evidence of an *al Qaida* and *Jemaah Islamiyah* presence within Thailand. When JI suspects from elsewhere in Southeast Asia fled to southern Thailand in the aftermath of large arrests by Singapore and Malaysia in December 2001, they were given safe haven by an element that was presumably partially sympathetic. In June 2003, Thai authorities picked up three Muslim community leaders on suspicion of planning major bomb attacks against foreign embassies and tourist spots as part of a JI plot. They were religious teacher Maisuri Haji Abdullah, his son Mayahi Haji Doloh and physician Waemahadi Wae-dao; all prominent community leaders in the south. Until his arrest on August 11, 2003, Hambali, the operations leader for JI, was able to blend into the Muslim community in Thailand.

While a JI presence in Thailand should not be denied, it would be a mistake to view longstanding grievances in Thailand as being subordinate to terrorist groups with global and abstract ideological agendas. The motivations for resistance are quite different. But transnational linkages to the wider Islamic world are clearly evident. *Jemaah Islamiyah* have tried to graft themselves onto other situations of insurgency or communal violence, such as in Chechnya or Bosnia. The south of Thailand remains vulnerable to those who are discontented with Bangkok's rule.

Bangkok Responds

Surin Pitsuwan, in an editorial in the *Bangkok Post* soon after the January, 2004 violence, expressed the fear that security forces could exacerbate the problem, and added: "The important prize to be won is the souls of the majority of Muslims in the south." Surin's warning is, essentially, that a heavy handed security response in the Muslim south will be counter-productive. Although at times Thai officials in the south appear to undermine Thailand's reputation through corruption and maladministration, the Thai government evidently recognizes that socio-economic development and preservation of identity are critical in undercutting separatist views. The social problems of the south are compounded by the presence of organized crime - not least of all because the region is awash with weapons.

In March 2004 the Thaksin government also made political capital out of holding a cabinet meeting in Pattani (under the watchful eye of large numbers of security personnel). The Thai cabinet approved a \$500 million aid

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package to the southern provinces - further proof that the Thaksin government is deeply worried about alienation in the Muslim south - although the funds are yet to reach the intended target. The Thaksin government needs to take care with the signals it sends from such meetings, however. Many in the region probably noticed that police detained two activists for merely distributing anti-Thaksin leaflets - the material was critical of Thaksin's handling of the south, and likened it to President Bush's invasion of Iraq. After a debate within Thailand's ruling elite between hawks and doves on what to do about the south, the Thaksin government offered an amnesty to separatists in Patani. More than 200 separatists surrendered after this program was introduced in June 2004.

The Thai government has identified the Muslim schooling system as a hotbed of radicalism and has made dramatic changes in this sector. The government line is that a new generation of Muslims returning from wars abroad, and from madrasas in places like Pakistan, may have infused new life into an old separatist problem - and are in danger of hitching it to wider international networks. The government has taken a series of steps designed to modernize the thousands of Islamic schools in Thailand. First of all, the government has announced plans to curtail schools that are too independent-minded. The number of Islamic schools is to be reduced, while those not flying Thailand's flag will be viewed as committing treason. Second, rather than closing all such schools, Thailand has chosen to monitor their operation. The government will place these schools under the Ministry of the Interior and restrict funding from foreign sources. Third, the government has sought to channel Islamic revivalism into more "acceptable" projects. By 2005 Thailand aims to set up its first Islamic university, which will be a branch of Egypt's Al-Azhar University. Thailand will provide much of the financial backing but will seek aid from outside sources, including Muslim countries. Fourth, the Thai government has shown some concern that violence in the south may give Thai Muslims a poor reputation. Thailand will sponsor radio and television programs to educate the Thai population about the Islamic faith.

Implications for U.S. Foreign Policy

When Matthew P. Daley, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, testified to Congress in March 26, 2003, he spoke of Thailand's importance to the United States. Daley spoke of the alliance (including Thai support for the war on terrorism), Thailand's transition to democracy, U.S. trade with Thailand, and cooperation in anti-drug efforts (while noting U.S. concern over the "1,500 extra-judicial killings"). Daley did not mention separatism in the south as a concern to Washington. However, the U.S. plans to establish a consulate in Hat Yai—located in

southern Thailand—which suggests that the US will increase its ability to monitor political sentiments in the south of Thailand.

Policy makers should be cautious about drawing links between separatist sentiment in southern Thailand and the Global War on Terrorism. It would be imprecise to assume that the recent troubles in Southern Thailand have an automatic link to *Jemaah Islamiyah* or *al-Qaida*. In fact, southern Thailand is home to a disgruntled Muslim community that has a history of dissent. Equally, the south has a great deal of organized crime and is flooded with illegal weapons. Intra-military/police feuding is a reason sometimes given by community leaders in the south to explain the violence. One suspect arrested in the January 2004 violence gave evidence - still to be verified - that three politicians from the ruling *Thai Rak Thai* party were involved in organizing the violence. In reality, the violence directed against the police in the south is probably a combination of separatist, criminal, and intra-service violence. But the evidence also points strongly to the fact that separatist sentiment has reared its head again in southern Thailand.

The key to settlement of Thailand's upheavals in the south relies on social, economic, and political initiatives that tackle the immediate concerns of the Muslim population. Policies implemented by Bangkok, a generation ago and since the January 2004 violence, amount to Thai recognition that this is the case. Fixing the problem of southern Thailand rests in Bangkok's hands, and Washington should be cautious about being dragged into this conflict.

The Thaksin government's approach—in direct contrast to the Republic of the Philippines—has been to downplay the problem rather than to attempt to hype it as one of international terrorism. Thaksin for a long time denied that separatism was behind violence in the south, even though his actions demonstrated the opposite. Thaksin has been wary of upsetting Thailand's valuable tourist industry, as well as trying to maintain fragile relations with the Muslim south. Likewise, there is strong evidence that Thai Muslims have been mobilized by international events, including the war in Iraq. Thaksin's motivation is to preserve community relations, and it helps to explain why Thailand felt it could not support the initial military action in Iraq—although Thai troops were inserted soon after the fall of Baghdad. President Bush conferred on Thailand the status of Major Non-NATO Ally (MNNA) on October 19, 2003 during his visit there. MNNA status does not, despite what the name might suggest, entail the security guarantee afforded to NATO countries. The status does indicate the importance of the bilateral alliance however. Thailand's southern problem is unlikely to alter the basically sound, cooperative relations between the U.S. and Thailand.



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